



Stand In the Tragic Gap, by Parker Palmer

The bad news is that violence is found at every level of our lives. The good news is that we can choose nonviolence at every level as well. But what does it mean, in specifics, to act nonviolently? The answer depends on the situation, of course, and a thousand situations might yield a thousand answers. Yet running through all of these answers we will find a single "habit of the heart": to be in the world nonviolently means learning to hold the tension of opposites, trusting that the tension itself will pull our hearts and minds open to a third way of thinking and acting.Â

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In particular, we must learn to hold the tension between the reality of the moment and the possibility that something better might emerge. In a business meeting, for example, I mean the tension between the fact that we are deadlocked about what to do and the possibility that we might find a solution superior to any of those on the table. In a post-September 11 world, I mean the tension between the fact that we are engaged in the endless cycle of war and the possibility that we might someday live in a world at peace.Â

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Of course, finding a third way beyond our current dilemma may be possible in theory, but it often seems unlikely in life. In a contentious business meeting, a better solution may well exist, but the pressures of ego, time, and the bottom line make it unlikely that we will find it. In a world at war, peace may be our dream, but the grim realities of greed, fear, hatred, and doomsday weaponry quickly turn that dream into a delusion.Â

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The insight at the heart of nonviolence is that we live in a tragic gap -- a gap between the way things are and the way we know they might

be. It is a gap that never has been and never will be closed. If we want to live nonviolent lives, we must learn to stand in the tragic gap, faithfully holding the tension between reality and possibility.Â

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--Parker Palmer